



Developing an Understanding of American Indians and Alaska Natives: Historical Trauma

In this brief, NAPTAC examines what historical trauma is and describes its monumental impact on Native people, culture, and health. Parent Centers can use this information to deepen their understanding of Native communities and to inform outreach and training activities.

What is Historical Trauma?

Trauma is anything that overwhelms our ability to respond, especially if we perceive (think or feel) that what supports us physically or emotionally is threatened or in danger. *Historical* trauma is distinct from other forms of trauma in that it includes individual experiences of violence and loss as well as distress connected to historical events, cultural destruction, and ongoing experiences of poverty and discrimination.¹

The term “historical trauma” was originally used to describe the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish people, but it has also been used to help describe why American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people have such high rates of depression, substance dependence, suicide, unemployment, dysfunctional parenting, low educational attainment, low life expectancy, diabetes, and other health and social concerns. The current issues facing AI/ANs may be the result of a **legacy of chronic trauma** and unresolved grief, sustained across generations beginning with the subjugation of Natives by dominant European settlers. *Historical* trauma is trauma that has been transferred to subsequent generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means, resulting in inter-generational cycles of trauma stemming from historical and current loss of population, land, and culture.

Core Concepts of Historical Trauma

AI/AN history is dominated by federal policies that intentionally tried to destroy entire tribal populations through targeted and destructive practices such as: direct warfare; dispensing smallpox-infected blankets; providing diseased and spoiled trade goods; removing tribes from their homelands and placing them on poor barren reservation lands; taking generations of Native children hundreds of miles from their communities to boarding schools; forbidding the use of tribal languages and traditional cultural practices; relocating tribal members to large urban centers to seek employment (Indian Removal Act of 1830); and terminating selected tribes outright (Termination Act 1963). As a result of these and other policies, subsequent generations have been subjugated, disoriented, isolated, and left with unresolved feelings of inferiority, grief, shame, and powerlessness.



Why Should Parent Centers Know About Historical Trauma?

Understanding historical trauma can affect how Parent Centers engage with tribal communities. As Parent Centers reach out to Native families and communities, they may experience resistance, suspicion, lack of trust, and even anger toward non-Natives. Some of these responses may be directly related to historical trauma.

Although research is scarce on programs addressing historical trauma and on mental and behavioral health of Native youth and adults, there *are* strategies that have been used with varying levels of success. These strategies are indicators of practices that Parent Centers could consider when working with Native parents and may give parents strategies to use with their own children.

Most of the interventions for historical trauma attempt to reconnect or reinforce the importance of including tribal languages, cultural practices, and ceremonies as a way to emphasize healing and protective factors for Native adults and youth. There are numerous linguistic and cultural differences within indigenous populations, yet there are some **common cultural features** that might inform intervention strategies, including:

- focusing on common cultural practices;
- using indirect communication styles;
- focusing on harmony and balance;
- using shared traditional beliefs in the existence of animal spirits as guides, ancestor spirits, and feeding the spirits; and
- acknowledging the connection with all creation.

It is important to remember the uniqueness of tribal communities, and to adapt appropriate interventions to be compatible within a tribe's context. Additional ways Parent Centers and others can support family development of protective factors include:

- encouraging positive parent-child relationships and interactions;
- helping families develop consistent routines and appropriate limits;
- promoting social networks among families;
- offering information about parenting and child development;
- providing information about activities families can do at home or in the community;
- encouraging families to read to their children; and
- developing trusting, respectful relationships with each family.

Suggestions for Addressing Historical Trauma

While the following strategies may not be things Parent Centers can do *directly* for Native parents, it is important to know the intensive work needed to help Native communities overcome the impact of historical trauma.

- Recognize the impact that historical trauma continues to have on AI/AN families and youth today, whether they live on reservations, in villages, in rural areas, or in urban centers.

- Understand how trauma can affect Natives' social skills, in particular how they relate to "outsiders" (those outside their family and community).
- Be aware that historical trauma affects individual and community self-esteem, causing AI/AN parents to feel uncomfortable among professional service providers. Because it is difficult for Native families to relate to non-Native people who have not experienced historical trauma, give them time to get to know you.
- Recall that education has been used to coerce assimilation among the youngest Natives, resulting in a distrust of those working with or connected to education agencies.
- Be patient in building relationships with AI/AN parents, as they are not inclined to communicate personal and family issues until trust has been established. Building that trust may take weeks, not days. Be patient, don't give up.
- Model unconditional understanding when historical trauma causes AI/AN parents to shame or blame themselves if their children are not perfect physically, mentally, or emotionally.
- Share NAPTAC's two briefs on resilience. One is specifically written for distribution to AI/AN youth, suggesting ways to bounce back from any form of trauma.
- Continue educating yourself about trauma-informed care and improved service delivery to American Indian and Alaska Native parents and youth with disabilities.

Resources

Brave Heart, M.Y., Chase, M.J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D.B. (2011, October-December). [Historical trauma among indigenous peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations](#). *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, (43)4, 282-290.

Lechner, A., Cavanaugh, M., & Blyler, C. (2016). [Addressing trauma in American Indian and Alaska Native youth](#) [Mathematica Policy Research Report]. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

References

¹ Kirmayer, L.J., Gone, J.P., & Moses, J. (2014). Rethinking historical trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 51(3), 299-319.